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ABSTRACT

Style is a crucial component of success in competitive forensics, whether debate or individual events, and one of the greatest benefits students get from participating in such events is the opportunity to develop a sense of style. In keeping with the classical canons of rhetoric, style (as it relates to forensics) can be limited to a consideration of word choice and arrangement. Not only does style affect every mode of persuasion, language may be the most significant of the available means of persuasion because it is the basic vehicle through which nearly every other means operate. Among the ways in which participation in forensics can help a student learn how to effectively manage the resources of language are: (1) forensics helps a student to discover that the essence of good writing is revision; (2) the more or less rigid time limits imposed on debate and individual events help students to develop and appreciate economy of style; (3) through forensics a student can learn much about how the impact of an argument is largely a matter of language; (4) forensics drives home the point that good style must be appropriate; and (5) what students get out of forensics is a more sophisticated view of the relationship between style and content. Students who engage in competitive forensics are less likely to lose sight of the fact that style is nothing but meaning. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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DEVELOPING AND UTILIZING STYLE THROUGH FORENSICS

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DEVELOPING AND UTILIZING STYLE THROUGH FORENSICS

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The famous Irish writer Oscar Wilde once observed, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing." Though, perhaps, you might be able to think of some exceptions to Wilde's conclusion, surely forensics is not one of them.

Style is a crucial component of success in competitive forensics, whether debate or individual events. And, consequently, one of the greatest benefits students get from participating in such activities is the opportunity to develop a sense of style.

In the next few minutes I want to talk about style, what it is, why it's so important, and how I see forensics as an especially good way to cultivate it.

First, let me begin with some definitions. When it comes to style, of course, definitions are not all that easy. Strunk and White, in their classic little book, say style is something of a "mystery."[1] Thonssen, Baird, and Braden, in their equally classic but much bigger book, say it is "puzzling."[2] But despite the difficulty of definition, definitions are plentiful.

Webster's dictionary, for example, lists nearly twenty meanings of the word style. Indeed, style can apparently refer to nearly anything. For some people it means simply correct grammar and usage. And, of course, that is an important element. You may recall that the 1984 Republican convention saw heated

floor debate over a single comma in the party's platform. The dispute had to do with the difference between a restrictive and a non-restrictive clause and the implications which that distinction had for whether Republicans were opposed to all tax increases or just some of them.

For others, the word style refers not so much to correct usage as to delivery. My experience has been that in beginning speech classes this is usually what students think of when they speak of style.

Still others might use the word to refer to different things entirely. Thus, you might hear it said that it was not Ronald Reagan's "style" to use hard evidence. Here the reference is really to supporting material. Often, the term is used to refer to some aspect of a speaker's character or personality as when some say John F. Kennedy had "style." Here credibility or ethos is the referent.

So style can loosely refer to many things. But even if we limit style to matters of language, which is what I wish to do, there are still plenty of definitions to choose from. You're familiar with them, I'm sure. They range from Jonathan Swift's pithy maxim that style is "proper words in proper places" to Buffon's provocative observation that "Style is the man himself."

For my purposes, in keeping with the classical cannons of rhetoric, I wish to limit style to a consideration of word choice and arrangement. Style, then, deals with the resources, or to use Osborn's term, the "powers" of language.[3]

How, then, does forensics develop or teach effective

management of the resources of language? There are many ways, but first I think it is important to underscore just how vital language is to effective communication. Indeed, I think a case can be made that language, and therefore style, is the most pivotal of all communication variables.

Clearly, as Quintilian reminds us, style has implications for every mode of persuasion.[4] Surely the way a speaker handles language says something about him or her; it creates an image and affects credibility. We are quick to make judgments about speakers on the basis of whether their language is forceful or wishy-washy, grammatical or incorrect, formal or informal, dull or lively. Moreover, certain language structures and devices can produce downright admiration for the eloquence of the speaker. Certainly, John F. Kennedy's credibility was partly dependent on his finesse with words and phrases. And Harry Truman's credibility was likewise bound up with his lack of finesse in this area. It was Seneca who said, "Language most shows a man. Speak that I may know thee."[5] His words underscore the relationship between style and ethos.

Just as style has implications for ethos as a mode of persuasion, so too does it affect pathos. Some words are more emotionally laden than others. Furthermore, certain language patterns, repetition for instance, are characteristically "emotional." Thus, even the silent reader of Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech or of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech can get emotionally involved in them. Such speeches are moving partly because of their style.

Language truly has the power to, as the ancients put it, "excite the passions."

Finally, language has implications for logos or logic and reasoning. As J. Michael Sproule observes, "Arguments consist of terms. In order for the argument to function, the terms must be understood; they must be decoded for meaning. Argument and language, then, are closely related." In fact, he goes so far as to say that "all uses of language may be called argument" and "all users of language may be called arguers."[6] Thus, we may evaluate the validity of a generalization on the basis of whether it is carefully limited or totally unqualified. That is partly a matter of language. Similarly, it is essentially a choice of language that results in an argument with certain premises explicitly stated, strongly implied, or left out altogether. No wonder that many argumentation texts, Freely for example, include a section on fallacies of language.[7] Style and logic are intimately connected.

So style affects every mode of persuasion. But beyond that I want to suggest that language may be the most significant of the "available means of persuasion" simply because it is the basic vehicle through which nearly every other means operates. More often than not, when we think we are manipulating one tool of persuasion we are really only varying language. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Consider, if you will, one of the most common and commonly studied persuasive techniques, fear appeals. Hundreds of experiments have been conducted to determine whether a strong

fear appeal works better or worse than a mild one. But what is the difference between the two? As Daniel O'Keefe points out in his review of the literature, many studies do not examine the degree of fear aroused in the audience at all. Rather, they define a fear appeal with reference to the properties of the message, that is, as he puts it, "'A high fear appeal message is one containing explicit, vivid depictions of negative consequences, and a 'low fear appeal message' is a tamer, toned-down version."[8] Obviously, this is a variation in language. Take a look, for example, at these two contrasting passages from Sprague and Stuart's The Speaker's Handbook.[9]

Here is the first passage:

> A dose of 600 rems produces acute radiation illness. Japanese A-bomb victims experienced a variety of physical symptoms and usually died within two weeks of exposure.

And here is an abbreviation of the second passage:

> The bomb has fallen, and you're unlucky enough not to have been killed immediately. There's nothing you can do except sit there dumbly, in your own vomit and excrement, while . . . your skin becomes leprous and detaches from your body in great clumps.

The authors rightly offer these passages as examples of messages which are either devoid of emotion or which might contain too much. But clearly, the real variable here is linguistic.

We can see the same thing if we look at the studies involving evidence use. I remember the first time I waded through those studies in preparation for my dissertation. What struck me was the extent to which most of the studies on this topic, my own included, were essentially manipulating language.

Though the studies purported to compare speeches which contained evidence with speeches which did not, when you read the experimental messages you quickly discovered that the ones which presumably contained no evidence actually did present evidence only at a higher level of abstraction than in the other messages. The variation was essentially linguistic in nature.

So style really is pivotal. Indeed, Burgoon, Jones, and Stewart argue that focusing on language and style might be a more profitable way of explaining communication effects than resorting to theories and concepts borrowed from other disciplines. In building the case for what they call a message-centered theory of persuasion, they make the following claim: "A program of message-related persuasion research has at the very least called into question specific psychological explanations of persuasion. Several studies using language intensity . . . suggest that this one message variable may significantly mediate predictions of dissonance, social judgment, inoculation, incentive, and other psychological theories of attitude change."[10]

So, language is the chief instrument or tool which the speaker has at his or her disposal and so, therefore, few variations in a message are possible except through variations in language. We should not be surprised, then, to discover that experience in forensics, among its many other benefits, is valuable in helping students develop and utilize style. Let me turn my attention now to how this is so.

There are a number of ways in which participation in forensics can help a student learn how to effectively manage the

resources of language. I want to concentrate on one aspect in particular, but it's worth reviewing the others.

First, forensics helps a student to discover that the essence of good writing, or perhaps any art, is revision. In individual events such as oratory and informative speaking and even in debate, at least in the first affirmative constructive, students learn the value of going through several drafts of a speech to polish the language so it is clear and vivid. The manuscript mode which is often typical of such speeches is conducive to such improvement for it permits the writer to tinker with the language until it is perfected.

Second, the more or less rigid time limits imposed in debate and individual events help students to develop and appreciate economy of style. Most theorists would agree that good style is characterized by brevity and succinctness, but the point is really driven home to a student when he or she is, say, the first affirmative rebuttalist and has four or five minutes to deal with perhaps a dozen arguments. Alas, sometimes such situations produce, in my judgment, a style that is too terse and abbreviated, even one that when combined with rapid fire delivery is barely rhetorical, but the principle of economy is nonetheless reinforced. With respect to individual events, it seems to me that one of the most valuable learning experiences for an orator or informative speaker or even an extemper comes when the coach says the speech is excellent in every way and then adds, "Now we just have to shave off three minutes of it!" A student can learn a lot about the principle of redundancy that way.

Third, through forensics a student can learn much about how the impact of an argument, its force, is largely a matter of language. He or she can come to appreciate that the strength of an argument is dependent not only on the amount of evidence behind it or the validity of the reasoning underlying it, but on the way it is stated as well. Similarly, students can learn why clarity is the foremost requirement of style as they see debates lost not because the judge did not accept a case but because he or she simply did not understand it.

Fourth, forensics drives home the point that good style must be appropriate. Students, especially when they speak from manuscript, quickly learn that there really are some fundamental differences between writing and speaking, that, in Winan's famous maxim, "a speech is not an essay on its hind legs."

But, finally, and most importantly, what students get out of forensics, at least ideally, is a more sophisticated view of the relationship between style and content. After participation in forensics they are more likely to discard the naive notion that language is mere ornament, that style is little more than decoration. They will come to understand that it is absurd, really, to think that there are two ways of saying the same thing.

This view that style and content are somehow separate, that style is merely the "dress" or "cloak" of thought is a trenchant one. Even highly educated people can subscribe to it. A few weeks ago, for example, some members of our university's English department, who should know better given their field of study,

were complaining about the new dean. They said he just didn't have the grace and style of the old dean, who, by the way, happened to be a debate coach in his former life. He just didn't know how to "say things in a nice way," they charged. But when I inquired further I discovered that the two administrators had different messages. The old dean had told them that while their department was fundamentally strong, there were some weaknesses that ought to be addressed and he wished to work with them to correct them. The new dean was telling them that even though there might be some things in which they could take pride, fundamentally they were weak and they ought to get started improving themselves. The difference was not that the one had been supportive and the other defensive in saying essentially the same thing. The difference was that they weren't saying the same thing. Because their messages contrasted in style, they inevitably contrasted in substance.

Similarly, when I say to a classroom of students, "I haven't made myself clear," instead of "You don't understand," I am not merely being polite. My message is not simply less insulting. Saying "I haven't made myself clear" is not a more positive way of saying "You don't understand." It says something else entirely!

And that is the way it always is with style. If you change it, you change the meaning, sometimes only slightly, sometimes dramatically as in the above examples. Forensics teaches this lesson effectively. I can remember as a student more than once coming back from a tournament dismayed that our case had not been

well received. "Did you use the so and so argument?" my coach would ask. And he would state the argument. "Oh yes," my colleague and I would reply. "We used that argument." But our coach would persist. "But is that what you said?" he would ask. And sooner or later we would realize that the way we said it was important--not because there were better or worse ways of saying it, but because, as Blair points out, "Style has always some reference to an author's manner of thinking."[11] Finally, as a result of coming back from tournaments and revising our case before going back out we came to abandon the simplistic view that we were dressing up the same old case. We came to see that we could not change the language of the case without changing the case itself.

Monroe Beardsley put it well in a delightful piece in which he takes to task style books which appear to treat style and content as inherently separate. He says, "We encourage . . . confusion when we speak of style as though it <u>were</u> [emphasis in the original] detachable and manipulable independent of meaning--when we define style as the 'how' of writing vs. the 'what'--when, in short, we lose sight of the fact that style is nothing but meaning."[12]

I contend that students who engage in competitive forensics are less likely to lose sight of that fact and that, therefore, when it comes to matters of style and language such students have a monumental advantage.

ENDNOTES

1. William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, The Elements of Style (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1959), p.52.

2. L. Thonssen, A. Craig Baird, and W. Braden, Speech Criticism, 2d. ed. (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1970), p. 487.

3. See Michael Osborn and Suzanne Osborn, Public Speaking, 3d. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1994), pp. 260-67.

4. Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria., trans. H. E. Butler, (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1920), IX, i.

5. Quoted in Jane Blankenship, A Sense of Style: An Introduction to Style for the Public Speaker (Belmont, CA: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1968), p. 11.

6. J. Michael Sproule, Argument: Language and Its Influence (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1980), pp. 1 & 24.

7. See Austin J. Freely, Argumentation and Debate: Critical Thinking for Reasoned Decision Making, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1990, pp. 162-64.

8. Daniel J. O'Keefe, Persuasion: Theory and Research (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 165.

9. Jo Sprague and Douglas Stuart, The Speaker's Handbook (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 180.

10. M. Burgoon, S. Jones, and D. Stewart, "Towards a Message-centered Theory of Persuasion: Three Empirical Investigations of Language Intensity," Human Communication Research, I (1975), 241.

11. Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, as quoted in Selected Readings in Rhetoric and Public Speaking, ed. Lester Thonssen (New York: H. W. Wilson, Co., 1942), p. 251.

12. Monroe C. Beardsley, "Style and Good Style," in Reflections on High School English, ed., Gary Tate (Tulsa: University of Tulsa, 1966), p. 96.